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AUTHOR Adler-Kassner, Linda
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ABSTRACT

Controlling "literacy processes" was a concern of members of the dominant culture during the Progressive Era (about 1890-1917). Educators wanted to set students on the "right" course before formal schooling was over. Four history textbooks from the era share a general sense of what is required for public literacy, but they present multiple public literacies, not a singular, uniform idea. The most important thing these historians shared was their devotion to progress, on the one hand, and conflict, on the other, all of which they expressed using the rhetoric of the American jeremiad. The first thing students needed to know to be publicly literate, according to the history textbooks, is what kind of shape the nation was in relation to the achievement of the "promise" of America. For historians Samuel Foreman, and James Alton James and Albert Hart Sanford, students did not need to get actively involved in maintaining the promise, because the forces of providence (with their able assistants, members of the dominant culture) could maintain it. The rhetoric of the "steady" jeremiad in these textbooks is understated, because the textbooks are quite functional--students need to stay the course, and the course is progress. For other historians, such as David Muzzey, and Charles and Mary Beard, the fiery rhetoric of an "active" jeremiad was designed to inculcate a sense of public literacy that required active participation in the movement of the nation toward the achievement of progress. (NKA)

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"Reading Progress": Historians and Public Literacy in the Progressive Era

Linda Adler-Kassner
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

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Controlling "literacy processes" was a concern of members of the dominant culture of the Progressive Era. For the reasons discussed earlier, members of that culture wanted to preserve their status as the dominant culture; this was one way to do it.

Theorists have long argued that school is one site where students are brought into the dominant culture; statements made by Progressive Era educators certainly bear out their theories. They were quite concerned with the country's prospects for success, given that there were many competing values circulating during this period. These educators believed that they needed to set students on the "right" course before they ended their formal schooling. Based on their statements, it seems reasonable to argue that all aspects of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the system of schooling" (Bourdieu, 1977, passim) were designed to bring students into the dominant culture or to make them what I call "publicly literate," able to understand, share, and reproduce the "common sense" meanings of language within the society. In other words, if a students were asked, "What part did Lincoln play in all stages of the [Civil] War," as they were in Charles and Mary Beard's *History of the United States* (Beard and Beard, 1921, 366), they had better answer that he played a significant part in each stage, and be able to enumerate his role. If, however, they raised the suggested that Lincoln's role in the war wasn't that significant, and was instead overstated in order to provide a positive role model, they would be judged incorrect and not publicly literate, because they did not reproduce the "common sense" meaning of Lincoln.

This paper is about the some of ways that history textbooks from the Progressive Era tried to make students publicly literate. When I started the research, I hypothesized that, given the dominant culture's concern for its own preservation

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and the fact that historians writing these textbooks worked within a common paradigm of American history, the Progressive paradigm, the books would present similar conceptions of public literacy, that their books would define important symbols, events, and movements in American history in the same ways. As my research continues, however, that's not exactly what I've discovered. Instead, what I'm finding is that while they share a general sense of what's required for public literacy -- like a sense that the nation is progressing forward, and participation by all is required to achieve progress -- their definition of specific parts of American history and, in fact, what's important at all to study, are fairly different. Thus, I argue that within the paradigm, the books present multiple public literac*ies*, not a singular, uniform idea.

Before I get to a few specific examples of these multiple literacies, I want to talk about two of the characteristics of the paradigm in which these books were written to give a sense what they had in common. For the purposes here, the most important thing these historians shared was their devotion to *progress*, on the one hand, and *conflict* on the other, all of which they expressed using the rhetoric of the American jeremiad. Progressive historians generally believed that the nation was progressing toward the achievement of some kind of virtuous democracy. For some, that meant a virtuous industrial democracy; for others, it meant a virtuous democracy with the yeoman farmer at its core. But along the way toward achieving this promise, these historians saw the nation falling into declension from it. Someone or something presented ideas that were not "progressive," and for a time the people would follow that idea, rather than the "correct" path, the one that the publicly literate *knew* would lead toward the achievement of the promise. In these textbooks, the factors that caused this fall into declension sometimes differed, a fact that surprised me and contributed to the idea of multiple literacies that I'm discussing here. Ultimately, however, the nation would be saved from declension

and set back on the right path again. One characteristic Progressive historians share, then, is that their narratives are framed within the rhetoric of the jeremiad.

Implied in the jeremiad is another characteristic shared by Progressive historians, conflict. While they believed that the nation was generally progressing forward (toward the achievement of the promise of democracy), the factors that pulled it away from that promise, into declension, caused constant conflict in the culture. Thus, conflict between good and bad ideas, people, and movements is also a prominent feature of their narratives. The question, though, is this: if the common characteristic of history textbooks was progress toward a promise, but both the promise and the route toward achieving it were different, how effective could the textbooks be in inculcating a *national* sense of public literacy, so that students would work to achieve a common promise that historians, educators, and other members of the dominant culture believed was essential to the survival of *their* United States?

Now that I've established all of that, let me use the books to demonstrate the differences in the jeremiads and the promises they establish, or, in the language that I use, differences in their definitions of what public literacy consisted of. The first thing students needed to know to be publicly literate, according to these history textbooks, is what kind of shape the nation was in relation to the achievement of the promise. But Progressive historians defined this position differently. For some, the nation was progressing along, moving slowly but steadily toward it, and it was *nearly* at hand. In these books, history was presented as something that essentially needed to be maintained. Students didn't need to get actively involved in maintaining the promise, because the forces of providence (with their able assistants, members of the dominant culture) could maintain it. instead, students needed only to remain in the position of watching the promise be achieved. The rhetoric of the jeremiad in these textbooks, therefore, is quite understated, because

the textbooks are quite *functional* -- students need to stay the course, and the course is progress. I call this the "steady jeremiad."

But in other books, the nation was not moving steadily toward the achievement of progress, and progress was not at hand. Instead, it stopped and started with huge bursts, and declension lay around every corner. In these books. public literacy required that students understand that democracy needed active maintenance. To use an oft-employed republican metaphor, it meant that students recognize that they needed to tend to the promise because they were the cultivators of the vineyard of democracy. In this case, the rhetoric of the jeremiad is fiery and active, presenting some people, events, and movements as *very* good, and others as *very* bad. The goal of the rhetoric wasn't just to communicate the essential facts of American history to students, but to motivate them to internalize the good (and recognize the bad) characteristics of each in order to recognize and act on what was required for public literacy. These textbooks are more *motivational* than functional, presenting a movement toward progress that needed constant care and attention. This is the "active jeremiad."

Two examples from four of the books I'm examining will demonstrate the differences in these jeremiads, differences that indicate that these textbooks establish different requirements for public literacy. The first example from each textbook comes from the preface or introduction, where the historians (or those writing introductions for them) established the purposes of their books and pointed out their "unique features." The second example from each comes from their chapters on the Civil War, particularly the conclusions of those chapters, where the "morals" of the "story" of the War are delineated. This second set of examples will demonstrate how the jeremiads defined in the introduction play out in the text.

Staying the Course: The Steady Jeremiad

The tone of the jeremiads in the "steady jeremiad" textbooks is established in the introduction to the books, where the authors lay out the definition and purposes of history as constructed in their textbooks. Those whose use the rhetoric of the steady jeremiad say things like:

> The three greatest achievements of the American people have been these: they have transformed a continent from a low condition of barbarism to a high state of civilization; they have developed a commercial and industrial system of vast proportions; and they have evolved the greatest democracy the world has yet seen. In this text, therefore, it has been my aim to present fully and clearly these three aspects of our growth: to show the forces of civilization pressing ever westward upon the wilderness and extending the boundaries of the white man's domain; to show an industrious and ingenious people moving ever forward to make new conquests in the economic world; and to show a liberty-loving nation struggling with new problems of government and advancing ever nearer to a complete realization of popular rule (Forman, 1913, p. v).

To the author of this book, Samuel Foreman, history is a virtually constant movement forward. Declensions from the promise are small and relatively inconsequential. Even the Civil War, a conflict between White, Anglo-Saxon males, is not portrayed as a significant detour from the course of progress. Although he concedes that the war was bloody and expensive, he notes that it didn't interfere with economic progress and, in fact, positively affected the South:
"In the North and the West industrial and commercial conditions were so favorable that even the war did not check the rising tide of prosperity." Even in the south, where he concedes that "the trade in cotton was almost completely destroyed and as a result the whole industrial system . . . paralyzed," Forman says that "[t]he war . . . had the effect of stimulating the manufacture of iron . . . especially the manufacture of guns and cannon. It also had the effect of giving the South a more diversified agriculture (p. 481).

Forman's chapter on the war ends by reaffirming the nation's stability and tranquility, rather than emphasizing the war as a significant declension from the promise:

> "At the close of the war there were about 1,000,000 men in the Union ranks and war expenses amounted to more than a billion dollars a year. Immediately after the surrender of Lee, however, the Union army began to be mustered out, and between May and November about 800,000 men changed from soldiers to citizens. "This change in condition," says Rhodes, "was made as if it were the most natural transformation in the world. these soldiers were merged into the peaceful life of communities without interruption to industry, without disturbance to the social order" (p. 462).

Another textbook that is uses the rhetoric of the steady jeremiad begins with the announcement that:

> It has been the aim of the authors of this book to give the main features in the development of our Nation, to explain the America of to-day, its civilization and its traditions. In order to do this, it was necessary to select topics from the various fields of human activity . . . Emphasis has been placed upon the fact that the position the United States occupies among the great nations is due primarily to the achievements of men and women in [political, industrial, social, and religious] fields (James and Sanford, 1909, vii-viii).

For these historians, James Alton James and Albert Hart Sanford, the Civil War was a declension, but it allowed Anglo-Saxons from North and South the opportunity to demonstrate the characteristics that they shared, not those that kept them apart:

> The defeat of the Confederacy was not due to lack of fighting qualities in her generals and soldiers, or of devotion in her people. . . . It was now less than two years since the first pitched battle of the war had been fought. In that short period the American people, both North and South, had displayed marvelous energy in the raising and training of two vast armies. They had given evidence of intense loyalty to the opposing principles that caused the war. They had put into operation with facility, and at great cost, all the governmental processes that were calculated to support a long war (p. 396).

As in the previous textbook, the war here does not disturb the nation's progress toward the achievement of the promise. Instead, it helps move it along by allowing American from North and South to demonstrate and observe the characteristics they share *as* Americans.

In both of these books, the jeremiad is a steady one that requires no additional effort on the part of citizens like the students reading these textbooks. The message here is that the nation is moving forward, guided by God (or providence) despite minor interruptions, and that it will continue to do so. In these books, no

individuals, movements, or events stick out as particularly significant, because all were equally important for the movement of the nation toward the achievement of progress.

Fiery Rhetoric: Active Jeremiad Histories

But not all Progressive historians participated in the steady jeremiad described above. Others employed an active jeremiad designed to inculcate a sense of public literacy that required active participation in the movement of the nation toward the achievement of progress. Those historians define history and the requirements for public literacy differently. The preface to David Muzzey's *An American History*, for example, says that the book does not

> tell over once more the old story in the old way, but [gives] the emphasis to those factors in our national development which appeal to us as most vital from the standpoint of to-day. . . . Dr. Muzzey [the author] has [also] undertaken the arduous task of giving the great problems and preoccupations of to-day their indispensable historical setting. This I deem the very special merit of his work, and am confident that it will meet with eager approbation from many who have long been dissatisfied with the conventional textbook, which leaves a great gap between the past and the present (Robinson in Muzzey, 1911, iii-iv).

One of the things that makes this introduction active, and therefore different from the previous two, is its emphasis. The implication, missing in the previous examples, is that the promise of democracy is *far* from achieved. To use an oft-employed republican metaphor, there are weeds in the vineyard of democracy. "Problems and preoccupations" of the present have roots that stretch far into the turf of the past; to be publicly literacy students must find those roots in the past, trace them to the present weeds, and remove them so that the vineyard may flourish.

Some of the weeds of the present, according to Muzzey's history, had roots that went through the southern position in the Civil War (but extended even deeper than that). In his chapter on the Civil War, Muzzey consistently presents the South as morally and financially backward, non-participants in the jeremiad. In a

chapter on "social progress" during the war, for example, he defines the tenets of progress for "any country" [as] Manufactures, railroad mileage, the growth of cities, the diffusion of knowledge, [and] progress in arts and letters . . . (p. 432), but says that the South was deficient in every category:

> The South had hardly any manufactures. . . She spun and wove but two and 1/2 percent of the cotton she raised, and only 1/4 of the 31,000 miles of railroad track in the U.S. was laid on her soil. While the free states of the North abounded in thriving cities . . . the census of 1860 found only six "cities" in Alabama with a population of 1000 or over, four in Louisiana, and none in Arkansas. Not a single Southern state had a free public school system before the war. Fifteen percent of the adult male white population of Virginia (in addition of course to practically all of the Negroes) were unable to read or write. . . while only 2/5 of one percent of the adult males of Massachusetts were illiterate. . . . The cause of this sad social and industrial condition in the South was the plantation system founded on Negro slavery. . . . Whatever relieving touches there are in the picture of the slave plantation . . . the system of slavery was a blight on industry and a constant menace to the character of the slaveholder (p. 433).

Muzzey goes on to discuss the flaws of southern" poor whites," as well, saying that "southern civilization was the worst enemy of their interests," but they failed to recognize it and professed their loyalty to the losing cause. To be publicly literate, according to Muzzey, students needed to understand how noxious the weed of southern values was in the vineyard of democracy.

A final example of an "active jeremiad" comes from Charles and Mary Beard's *History of the United States*. In the introduction, the Beards make a plea for students to be active, involved, and *educated* citizens who can help the nation move toward the achievement of a virtuous industrial democracy. The Beards define their readers as

> boys and girls on the very threshold of life's serious responsibilities" and say that their book has "deliberately aimed at standards of maturity. . . . We have aimed to stimulate habits of analysis, comparison, association, reflections, and generalization -- habits calculated to enlarge as well as inform the mind. We have been at great pains to make our text clear, simple, and direct; but we have earnestly sought to stretch the intellects of our readers -- to put them upon their mettle. Most of them will receive the last of their formal

> instruction in the high school. The world will soon expect maturity from them. Their achievements will depend upon the possession of other powers than memory alone. The effectiveness of their citizenship in our republic will be measured by the excellence of their judgment as well as the fullness of their information (p. vi-viii).

It seems redundant to point out that this introduction demonstrates the rhetoric of an active jeremiad. They want to "enlarge and inform the mind" not for exclusively intellectual reasons, but to prepare students to be publicly literate citizens who can help the country achieve the promise.

At the end of the Beards' version of the promise of American history lay a virtuous industrial democracy. But since the South was a region whose economy depended entirely on agriculture (something that is emphasized often in this textbook), it is clear that it was the northern, industrialized United States that would lead the nation toward the achievement of this promise. In the Beards' jeremiad, therefore, the South is characterized as standing against the achievement of the promise:

> When we measure strength for strength in those signs of power -- men, money, and supplies -- it is difficult to see how the South was able to embark on secession and war with such confidence in the outcome. In the Confederacy at the final reckoning there were eleven states in all . . . a population of nine millions, nearly one-half servile . . . a land without great industries to produce war supplies and without vast capital to furnish war finances . . . Even after the Confederate Congress authorized conscription in 1862, Southern man power, measured in numbers, was wholly inadequate to uphold the independence which had been declared. How, therefore, could the Confederacy hope to sustain itself against such a combination of men, money, and materials as the North could marshal (p. 348)?

And in the concluding paragraph to the chapter, in which the "moral" of the War is summarized, they emphasize the ways in which the South excluded itself from participation in achieving industrial democracy:

> From the very beginning in colonial times there had been a marked difference between the South and the North. The former . . . was devoted to a planting system . . . and in the course of time slave labor became the foundation of the system. The North, on the other hand, supplemented

> agriculture by commerce, trade, and manufacturing. Slavery, though lawful, did not flourish there. An abundant supply of free labor kept the Northern wheels turning.
>
> This difference between the two systems . . . was increased with the advent of the steam engine and the factory system. Between 1815 and 1860 an industrial revolution took place in the North. Its signs were gigantic factories, huge aggregations of industrial workers, immense cities, a flourishing commerce, and prosperous banks. Finding an unfavorable reception in the South, the system was confined mainly to the North. . . .
>
> The Civil War . . . tested the strength of both North and South, in leadership, in finance, in diplomatic skills, in material resources, in industry, and in armed forces. By the blockade of Southern ports, by an overwhelming weight of men and materials, and by relentless hammering on the fields of battle, the North was victorious.
>
> The results of the war were revolutionary in character. . . . The Southern planters who had been the leaders of their section were ruined financially and almost to a man excluded from taking part in political affairs. The union was declared to be perpetual . . . The power and prestige of the federal government were enhanced beyond imagination. The North was now free to pursue its economic policies. . . Planting had dominated the country for nearly a generation. Business enterprise was to take its place (pp. 376-377).

The North was rewarded for its virtuous nature here by receiving the industrial revolution, which moved it significantly closer to the achievement of the Beards' promise of *industrial* democracy. To be publicly literate, students needed to recognize that this virtue was rewarded, while the South was penalized -- clobbered in the Civil War, stripped of its status and even its curency -- for its fealty to a less industrialized value system.

Conclusion

The differences between these books -- four of eight that I'm examining in a larger study -- is not inconsequential. They indicate that Progressive historians who were fundamentally concerned about making students publicly literate defined that literacy differently, and thus communicated these different definitions in their textbooks. Within the Progressive paradigm, therefore, I argue that these books presented multiple literacies -- their jeremiads were different, indicating that they lacked consensus across the paradigm on such basic elements of "literacy" as what

was required to demonstrate it. Elsewhere, I've shown that they also assign different definitions of to different important symbols, demonstrating that while they may have agreed about what elements were required for public literacy, they did not agree as to which historical symbols embodied these definitions.

Why is it important that these differences exist? Because it gives us a new way to think about literacy as communicated from school to student, rather than the literacies that students bring to school. By way of brief example, let me point out that I counted about thirty presentations in the 4Cs program that mentioned "multiple literacies," but all of them were about the literacies that students bring to an ostensibly monolithic school system. What I'd like to suggest here, the note on which I'll close, is that we need to reexamine the materials that students face in school, as well, and examine the multiple possibilities that might exist there.

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